

# From Cub Scout to Pentagon

Duxbury native  
speaks on sacri-  
fice of veterans

By MARIBETH CONWAY

Understanding the sacrifices of the veterans is the lesson learned and shared by U.S. Marine Corps Brigadier General Ronald Johnson at this year's Memorial Day Service at First Parish Church.

A Duxbury native, Johnson is director of operations for the U.S. Marine Corps stationed at the Pentagon.

Before Johnson addressed the audience, Barry Dunlap, a



Gen. Johnson

past commander of American Legion Post 223, provided a brief history of the origins of Memorial Day.

Though many versions of this story exist, the most official is an order made in 1868 by John Logan, commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Logan commanded all his troops to acknowledge May 30 as a day to recognize fallen soldiers. "No form or ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way, arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect," Logan stated in his order.

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## 'Understand their Sacrifice'

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Dunlap read another, less official, version of the Memorial Day origin story, where soldiers witnessed a woman and two children tending to a soldier's grave — removing weeds and laying fresh flowers. The soldiers were so moved by this act, they established a Decoration Day, now known as Memorial Day, for fallen comrades. Over time veterans have paid respect to their fellow soldiers, Dunlap read, "partly, as a catharsis and partly so that those who come after will not forget."

The Duxbury High School Concert Choir then sang "America the Beautiful" followed by a reading of the Gettysburg Address, by high school senior John Bostrom. Johnson then took to the podium, welcomed by a standing ovation.

Johnson, a DHS graduate, served in Desert Storm, Desert Shield and Operation Iraqi Freedom and holds several military honors including a Bronze Star and the Legion of Merit.

After three tours in Iraq, Johnson said, he felt "safe" being back home in Duxbury. He recalled marching as a Cub Scout in the town parade and said he never imagined one day returning as a guest speaker for the day's services. Now, Johnson has a true understanding "of what veterans went through."

Since the Vietnam War, Johnson said Americans had possibly "grown complacent" in their acknowledgment of the sacrifice of veterans, but now there is a reemergence of appreciation.

He acknowledged that people sitting in the audience had possibly lost loved ones in the Iraq War. "I know how it feels to lose friends on the battlefield ... not being able to sleep at night." Johnson lost 54 men in his three Iraq tours.

Johnson named three of those soldiers, who were all killed by explosives. "I'm sorry that I let you down," were the last words of Nick Nolte, "a rock, hard, strong Marine," described Johnson.



**An audience mixed with veterans and laypersons pledged to the flag at the Memorial Day Service at First Parish Church. Duxbury native and Brigadier General Ronald Johnson spoke at the service.**

Nolte left behind a wife and a three-year old daughter. Another fallen soldier was Lance Corporal Redford, Johnson's youngest marine, barely 19 years old, who died a week before he was due home.

"These stories go on and on," said Johnson. Although it's sad to talk about the sacrifices they've made, Johnson said it is an "awakening" of awareness of the sacrifices made by veterans of past

Wars.

When Marines mourn, Johnson explained, "we don't talk about how our friends died, we talk about how they lived." As Johnson stepped away from the podium, he was given another standing ovation.

The audience remained on its feet to salute the flag and sing The Star Spangled Banner. Reverend Catherine Cullen then closed the service with a prayer.